DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 345 251 CS 213 299

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TITLE Valuing the Collaborative, Language-Centered Classroom: What Theorists and Teachers Tell Us.
PUB DATE 19 Mar 92
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (43rd, Cincinnati, OH, March 19-21, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Environment; *Cooperative Learning; *Critical Thinking; Educational Change; Higher Education; Instructional Effectiveness; Instructional Improvement; Teacher Role; *Theory Practice Relationship; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS Britton (James); Collaborative Writing; *Composition Theory; Emig (Janet)

ABSTRACT

Educators at all levels are increasingly being told that classrooms should be places where students are guided through processes of critical inquiry, work collaboratively, and use both written and oral languages as tools for learning. The value of a collaborative, language-centered approach to teaching and learning can be demonstrated by drawing on two sources: (1) the work of language and composition theorists; and (2) the experiences of practicing classroom teachers. Theorists such as Janet Emig and James Britton present strong arguments for the use of written and oral language as ways of making and communicating meaning, of shaping knowledge, and of coming to know oneself. School and college teachers who espouse collaborative classrooms often discuss this approach in terms that transcend merely its language-based and cognitive value. Beyond these categories, teachers view such a classroom in terms of its social and cultural value, both to students--in the classroom and beyond--and to teachers, thus ascribing to it a global, humanistic value beyond the subject matter of the classroom. In short, despite the forces which wage war against this kind of pedagogical shift, this information attests to the value of changing the traditional classroom model to one that is collaborative, process-oriented, and which features both oral and written language which are used to create meaning as well as to communicate it. (Included are three figures which list the values of such an approach, based on an informal survey of teachers.) (Author/HB)

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Valuing the Collaborative, Language-Centered Classroom: What Theorists and Teachers Tell Us

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Paper Presented at
Conference on College Composition and Communication
Cincinnati, Ohio, March 19, 1992
Session Entitled "Critical Thinking, Language in Use:
A Natural Collaboration in the Classroom

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Valuing the Collaborative, Language-Centered Classroom: What Theorists and Teachers Tell Us

Abstract

Educators at all levels are increasingly being told that classrooms should be places where students are guided through processes of critical inquiry, work collaboratively, and use both written and oral language as tools for learning. This paper addresses the value of a collaborative, language-centered approach to teaching and learning, drawing on two sources: 1) the work of language and composition theorists; 2) the experiences of practicing classroom teachers.

Theorists such as Janet Emig and James Britton present strong arguments for the use of written and oral language as ways of making and communicating meaning, of shaping knowledge, and of coming to know oneself in the world. In working with school and college teachers who espouse collaborative, language-centered classrooms, I have found that, in addition to language-based and cognitive values, teachers discuss this approach in terms that can best be described as social and cultural--ascribing values to it that lie beyond the immediate subject matter of the classroom and have global implications. This paper presents information from both theorists and teachers to argue for the value of changing the traditional classroom model to one that is collaborative, process-oriented, and features both oral and written language used to make meaning as well as communicate it.

Valuing the Collaborative, Language-Centered Classroom: What Theorists and Teachers Tell Us

The subject of this paper is the value of the classroom in which students are guided through processes of critical inquiry, work collaboratively, and use both written and oral language as tools for learning. I've heard this classroom called the interactive classroom, the whole-language classroom, the integrated classroom. Regardless of what we call this classroom approach, the underlying theme is that students are engaged in purposeful activity--in "meaning-making" instead of in "meaning-memorizing." And all these classrooms are based on the active production of student language both orally and in writing.

Increasingly, the professional literature encourages teachers at all levels, K to college, to base classroom methods on this paradigm instead of the more traditional methods of lecture/discussion, pre-formulated assignments, and passive learning. The question I am addressing in this paper is "why should we?" What is to be gained by giving up customary practice? What are the values of the collaborative, language-centered classroom?

The significance of this approach to teaching was corroborated for me one day when I was winding up the semester's work in our state-mandated methods course for secondary teachers in all disciplines, Improvement of Reading in Middle and Secondary Schools. We had just finished drawing up a list of all the methods we'd covered during the term for improving reading and learning from text, and we were examining the basic principles underlying these strategies, when a student had a sudden flash of insight into her own experiences as a learner. She waved her hand wildly in the air to get my attention and said, with a sort of amazement

> "Now I understand what happened to me in a two-semester course I took as a freshman, History of Western Civilization. The first term I had a teacher who lectured for the whole course and gave us a multiple-choice mid-term exam and final. The other half of the course I had a different professor who had us doing all the things we're talking about. We kept response notes on our readings and we worked in small groups a lot; we wrote papers and exchanged them;

> everyone did an independent project and gave a presentation on it. I'm a senior now and I don't remember a thing I learned the first term of Western Civ, but I can remember almost everything from the second semester. I really learned in that class."

As soon as she finished, several members of the class called out the names of the two professors. They'd had exactly the same experience with the course and agreed with her judgment that the active, inquiry-oriented learning environment had been much more successful in helping them understand and remember the material.

Of course, I can hardly call this valid research proving the merits of interactive classrooms, but my students' experience substantiates what theorists have been telling us about the values of these non-traditional approaches: they improve learning and retention, helping students make new material their own.

At this point, I'd like to explore what language arts theorists tell us about collaborative, language-centered classrooms and then go on to describe the responses of classroom teachers to these same issues.

James Britton states that language "is the means by which human beings create the world for themselves and themselves in the world," which suggests why language is so important in the classroom. In Language and Learning, Britton says that language is the primary means by which humans symbolize experience. We turn the multiple images of reality into symbols--into words--in order to handle our experience of the world, organizing reality through language. One of the ways we do this is to classify experience with language, creating categories that make sense to us and allow us to broaden our understanding as new information comes in. For example, we use the symbol "green" to cover a wide range of shades from a pale and golden spring green, a deeper grass green, an avocado green, to a dark forest green. Language allows us to classify all these colors as one family, green, (though they're all different) and then describe the variations of this color through the associations brought about by other symbols: spring green, forest green, avocado green. It also allows us to add shades to our "green" category such as last year's designer color--a dull and brassy green appropriately labeled "breen." Without language to show that all these colors are sub-categories of green, each color would represent a totally

different, unrelated tint because they are indeed all different. According to Britton, this is how we organize our representation of reality--in other words "create the world" for ourselves by turning "confusion into order" with language. It also explains how we continue throughout our lives to add to and modify our understanding of experience by relating the new to the old through language.

Talk forces us to shape our ideas into oral language, especially if we are communicating to others. This shaping process is even sharper in writing because we have more time to reflect and to wrestle with ideas mentally, forming them more carefully, revising them if necessary. All of this is powerful grounds for viewing language as the primary medium through which we learn about our world and position ourselves in it, making a strong case for classrooms that are, as Britton puts it, "afloat on a sea of talk." Students simply learn better in language-centered classrooms.

Janet Emig emphasizes the value of writing in her essay "Writing as a Mode of Learning." She points out that writing is <u>unique</u> among the four language processes because writing alone is

<u>originating</u>--producing something that didn't previously exist except in the mind of the writer

<u>creating</u>--making meaning (as with all language processes)

<u>graphically recording</u> that meaning

She also describes the unique correspondence between learning and writing. The act of writing embodies all three of the major ways we learn:

enactive--by doing (physical act of writing)

iconic--by making an image (symbols on the page)

representational/symbolic--by stating in words (turning ideas into language)

These three learning processes involve the eye, the hand, the brain in what Emig terms a "reinforcing cycle . . . that marks a uniquely multi-representational mode for learning" (p. 126), involving many aspects of our physical and mental being. Writing also involves both hemispheres of the brain--the linear left brain and the more intuitive right brain. It provides immediate feedback because the writer can re-read and review what he or she has produced; and it requires the writer to structure ideas, establishing connections and relationships among them in order to write about them. Finally, it is a personal act, entirely under the control of the writer, self-rhythmed, paced to meet the writer's needs and interests. All of these ideas

combine to help us understand why writing is such a valuable tool for learning.

Other theorists also discuss the multiple benefits of classrooms based on language, writing, and inquiry. James Squire points out that comprehension is enhanced when students "reprocess" ideas again and again in many different ways, summarizing information, rephrasing it in their own words, retelling it to each other or in writing, elaborating and explaining it, acting out, translating from one language medium to another. All of these approaches require learners to review material and reprocess it, to be active in constructing meaning and to internalize it in ways that are personally significant, thereby increasing long term retention.

Language development is also supported in these non-traditional classrooms. In Uncommon Sense: Theoretical Practice in Language Education, John Mayher stresses the value of approaches to teaching based on integrating reading/writing/listening/ and speaking, reminding us "that all aspects of language are continuously being developed by purposeful use in all four modes" (p. 213). Yet another reason for valuing classrooms based on purposeful meaning-making through language production.

Now I'll turn to what teachers tell us. During the last year, I ran workshops with teachers at local conferences in which I had them work in small groups discussing the value of the collaborative, language-centered classroom. These groups were composed of English language arts teachers from early elementary level through college, all practicing teachers. I asked them to brainstorm lists in answer to the question "What is the value of the interactive classroom?" What is the value to students? What is the value to teachers? Is there any value beyond the classroom? We put their responses on large sheets of newsprint and hung them around the room, coming back together as a whole group to discuss what we saw on the lists. Each time, we were impressed by the length of the lists, at the multiple ways in which teachers saw these classroom approaches as valuable. But the impact went well beyond sheer numbers. Let me show you what the classroom teachers I worked with saw as the values of the non-traditional classroom. I combined all the lists from the workshops, removed duplications, and organized the items into categories. See Figures 1, 2, and 3.

Value for Students

Cognitive (related to learning and thinking)

1. Long-term retention is increased
2. Caters to a greater variety of learning styles
3. Students learn from one another
4. Responsibility for own learning
5. Higher level thinking skills are developed
6. Exposure to a variety of materials and responses
7. Teaches connections between ideas
8. Meaningful (integrating helps tie loose ends together)
9. Relevance is increased
10. Larger pool of information
11. Sparks creativity

Linguistic (related to language use and development)

12. Connecting receiving and sending
13. Students develop language ability through use

Personal

14. Feel successful
15. Easier to share in small numbers (safety, increases risk-taking)
16. Increased involvement increases enjoyment
17. Emotional health and self-esteem increases

Social

18. Learn to cooperate with peers
19. Acceptance of other points of view
20. Leadership skills
21. Communiction skills
22. Necessity for compromise

Figure 1

Value Beyond the Classroom

Life and Job Skills

1. Students learn life skills
2. Learn communication skills applicable to real life situations
3. Improves listening skills
4. Enhances speaking skills
5. Career training is not isolated--learn job skills

Personal Skills for Lifelong Learning

6. High motivational level for self-discovery, independent learning
7. Creates critical thinkers, problem-solvers
8. Greater sense of responsibility--we're all in this together

Global Values

9. Understanding and acceptance of others, their views and beliefs
10. Increases interpersonal relationships; reduces prejudice
11. Preparation for our changing world--living with and accepting diversity
12. Preparation for a democratic society--decision-making, cooperation, compromise, communication

Figure 2

Value for the Teacher

Classroom Environment

1. Relaxed classroom
2. Cooperative classroom
3. Authentic learning with willing students
4. Collaborative learning among teacher and students

Relationship with Students

5. Breaking teacher dependency
6. Get to know kids
7. Learn new things from students
8. See strengths and weaknesses of individual students
9. More ways to assess student abilities and learning
10. More likely to reach every student
11. Bring more students to health--marginal, low self-esteem students

Teaching Methods and Rewards

12. Less meaningless paper
13. Less work stress
14. More thinking time for the teacher
15. Feel greater success as kids work
16. Joy of work/life--affirmation of yourself as a teacher

Figure 3

An examination of these lists shows that teachers and theoreticians alike see the value of these language-based classroom practices in helping students become better learners, thinkers, and communicators. Teachers in these workshops talked about longterm retention, connections between ideas, enhanced creativity, higher level thinking skills, and development of language abilities, just as the language arts theorists did. They also saw benefits beyond the immediate subject matter of the classroom. A teacher I work with in the schools expressed it very well one day as we were discussing ways to deal with a student who had made fun of another student's paper during group sharing time. She said, with a sigh, "When you're teaching writing as a process, you're teaching so much more than writing." The lists of values in Figures 1, 2, and 3 contain many personal and social skills that make students more capable as learners and as people. Each workshop in which I gathered this information listed growth in students' self-esteem as one of their values; and if you remember, it's also on the list of values for the teacher. In addition, these lists show that teachers believe students in these classrooms are internalizing the learning and communication skills they'll need for a lifetime of living and working in the world beyond school: decision-making, problem-solving, speaking and listening skills. Finally, teachers see these approaches as having far-reaching potential for affecting the world we live in by preparing students for life in a multi-cultural society, and giving them skills necessary for maintaining democracy.

The list of Values for the Teacher lacks the usual terms we've come to associate with these non-tradiitonal methods--no mention of teacher as facilitator or coach or empowering students. What I see is that in teachers' perceptions these methods create a more relaxed, informal environment in which it is easier for students to learn <u>together</u> and for teachers to develop more fruitful relationships with their students. The success for teachers is apparent in that last statement: joy; affirmation. Judging by these teachers, students aren't the only ones whose self-esteem improves in interactive classrooms.

Given the rich values theorists and the teachers in my workshops see stemming from these approaches, one wonders why so many classrooms are still based on passive learning, on what Connie Weaver labels the

"transmission model" of teaching. I wander the halls at the University of Michigan-Flint and see classroom after classroom where students sit in rows taking notes as the professor lectures. I visit a local high school where students go through six-week units doing grammar exercises out of a textbook, culminating in writing one perfect paragraph with a topic sentence and three supports. A colleague complains to me that her first grader, who already knows how to read, does very little actual reading and writing in her language arts program, but brings home a fat sheaf of dittoed worksheets on phonics every Friday, each one checked by the teacher for accuracy and decorated with a gold star. Clearly we have a long way to go in changing the face of the classroom throughout our schools and colleges.

Many forces in our society fight against the kind of pedagogical shift we're talking about in this session, for instance, the increase in testing and assessment at all educational levels. Most recently, at the college level, the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools has instituted a requirement that all member institutions have a plan in place by 1995 for assessing student academic achievement. At the K-12 level, there are attempts in several states, Michigan among them, to enforce a state-mandated curriculum based on testable outcomes, which many fear will further entrench traditional methods as teachers shape curriculum to meet assessement requirements. Prepackaged instructional programs also circumvent attempts to change classroom practice. The teacher confronted with a two-foot high assemblage of teaching guides, ditto masters, and overheads to go with her reading text is likely to rely on whatever methods the textbook publishers espouse.

These are all forces from outside the classroom that inhibit change. But a lot of the resistance is due to the teachers themselves and the context of teaching. Many teach from the mistaken belief that students only learn what is directly taught and tested, overlooking or refusing to recognize the multiple values of the interactive classroom. Isolation is another factor--the isolation of one discipline from another so that recent research and theory in language, writing, and learning are not well-known to those outside the field of English. Teachers are also isolated in their own classrooms, usually unaware of what is going on in the next classroom, therefore unable to benefit from another teacher's successful pedagogical strategies. Inertia is finally also a factor here--the sheer weight of tradition.

I'd like to end on a more positive note and suggest that two major movements in the past decade have been instrumental in furthering the curricular changes so highly valued by the teachers in my workshops: 1) Writing Projects such as the National Writing Project; 2) WAC movement. Both programs recognize the relationship between writing and learning and encourage students' active meaning-making through language. Both reach teachers at all educational levels with Writing across the Curriculum in particular drawing in teachers from disciplines outside English. Stephen Tchudi writes of the "hidden agenda" in Writing across the Curriculum. What is this hidden agenda? Getting teachers to structure their classrooms so that students are using language to discover ideas, discuss ideas, to make the information of the discipline their own. The focus shifts from transmission of information to inductive/discovery learning. I see this "hidden agenda" take over with Writing Project teachers as well. Once they recognize the potential for writing and the benefits of using peer groups, these techniques spill over into all their teaching; their classrooms undergo permanent change. Then, convinced that better learning takes place with these writing-to-learn processes, the writing project teachers begin to spread the word to colleagues in other disciplines.

If all of us working in the field of composition and communication are equally convinced by what theorists and teachers tell us of the value of language-based, collaborative classrooms, we have our work cut out for us.

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